

AFRREV IJAH  
An International Journal of Arts and Humanities  
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia  
Vol. 1 (3), August, 2012:187-200

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print)

ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

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## **An Exploration of the Historical and the Political Backgrounds of Liberia**

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### **Abstract**

*Many socio-political and historical scholars have written on the emergence of the present Liberian State with divergent theories and postulations*

*(findings). This paper presents a brief political history of Liberia. The intention is to bring to the fore the political and economic inequality that existed between the indigenous Liberians and the Americo-Liberians right from the foundation of Liberia. One would appreciate the fact that the mass internal displacement witnessed in Liberia between 1989 and 1996 was a direct impact of this unequal distribution of wealth and political offices. The situation only got to the climax during the tenure of President Samuel Doe in whose time the civil war broke out.*

**Key Words:** *Internal displacement, Liberia, Politics, civil war and cold war*

### **Introduction**

One major contributing factor to internal conflicts in Africa in the post-Cold War era has been the ending of the Cold War itself. The end of the Cold War removed the global tapestry capable of suppressing, containing and managing the under-currents of conflicts in the respective spheres of the super powers; it left Africa marginalized and made available mercenaries and weapons of destruction (Adejumobi, 2001). Such conflicts, however, do not just happen overnight, rather they have deep roots in the histories of the states concerned and the result of a long-term degenerative process (Lemarchand, 1998).

The crisis of anarchic wars and complete normative collapse in Liberia clearly goes beyond even the most pessimistic predictions. In less than 10 years after Charles Gbarngay Taylor led a band of 150 ragtag fighters from Cote D-voire to invade Liberia's Nimba County, what became popularly known as "rebel war" engulfed both Liberia and Sierra Leone states in the Mano Region (Kieh, 1998). For Liberia, up to 1980, had existed as a state for nearly one and half centuries and had cloaked itself in a number of accolades, such as "an oasis of tranquility in a continent awash with political crises and civil wars"; "an African outpost of Western civilization"; and "Africa's longest republic". (Zartman, 1995). However, a bloody coup d'état in 1980 and a rebel incursion almost a decade later in 1989 set Liberia on the road to self-destruction. The incursion degenerated into a bloody civil war which continued for seven years and exhibited the major characteristics of state collapse – a paralyzed and inoperative central authority; inability to guarantee the security of its citizenry and destroyed socio-economic system. The conflict apparently spilled over from Liberia into Sierra Leone in 1991 with a force so destructive that all formal state structures collapsed and a substantial percentage of the populations of the two countries either killed or displaced. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone are located in the Mano River Region

(Frempong, 1995). Liberia is located in West Africa and shares borders with Sierra Leone to the west, the Republic of Guinea to the north, Cote d'Ivoire to the east and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. With a pre-war population of about 2.1 million (1984 Census), Liberia, a country rich in natural resources, including iron ore deposits of global significance, alluvial diamonds and gold deposits as well as forest resources, should have, all things being equal, provided a welfare rather than a warfare system for its citizens (Robin, 2000).

### **Liberia before 1822**

Liberian history was dominated by sixteen major groups of which the most important in terms of their history, economy, politics and numerical strengths were the Bandi, Bassa, Gio, Gola, Grebo Kissi, Kpelle Krahn, Kru, Loma, Mano and Vai (Guannu, 1985). Most of these groups lived in communities in which chiefs, elders and priests were the most immediate authority. In these societies, mechanisms for social control were characterized by military, religious and social sanctions in which secret societies, especially the Sande and the Poro played key roles in managing social and political strife through the provision of secular and sacred functions (Clower, 1995).

### **Liberia between 1822 and 1944**

The basis for the establishment of Liberia is encompassed in dynamics that had little to do with the original inhabitants of the coastal and hinterland areas of what is today known as modern Liberia. Rather, these dynamics fall within the context of the rapid economic developments taking place in the United States in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Ellis, 1996). This made the earlier labour intensive economic processes virtually unprofitable and with industrialisation, slavery, at least, in Northern United States became an increasingly obsolete form of economic investment. Abolitionists clamoured for disbanding slavery so freemen could enter the open labour market system of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The freed slaves drew up what came to be known as the *Elizabeth Compact*, between themselves and the ACS, which produced the framework of government for the ACS's settlement effort (Casswell, 1970). The first shipload of freed slaves arrived in present day Liberia in January 1822, after a supposedly negotiated purchase of the Cape Mesurado area (Monrovia) by the leaders of the expedition and the chiefs who owned the area (Innes, 1978). The preamble of the 1847 Constitution – "We the people of the Republic of Liberia were originally the inhabitants of the United States of North America...."(Liberia, 1839)

– confirmed the emergent segregated society. Citizenship was restricted to only those of the settler stock to the exclusion of the original inhabitants. Worse still, the constitution made no provision regarding the government of the indigenous groups but left all such questions to be determined by the government of the Americo-Liberians. In effect, the Americo-Liberians never perceived the indigenes to have a past worthy of inclusion in the corpus of Liberian history. In place of a common Liberian identity, an internal colonialism model was introduced in which the dominant core exploited the numerically preponderant periphery and used its political and economic power to maintain its superiority.

The original inhabitants were set apart and treated as a subordinate and inferior group and discrimination against them hardened into policy as well as a habit of mind. This caste system fostered ethnic hatred among the Liberian people. The Liberian colony passed a law which placed indigenous African children who came to live in the colony in servitude. The law stipulated that no native youth under the age of eighteen shall be allowed to dwell in the families of colonists without being bound for a specified term of years according to the rules prescribed in an act concerning apprentices (Harold, 1985).

In an independence speech to the Common Council, in Monrovia on July 26, 1870, Alexander Crummell admonished Liberians to respect and assimilate the indigenous people into the Liberian society (Tellewoyan, 2003).

### **Liberia: 1944 to 1980**

The two key administrations, which were central to the development and introduction of Liberia into the international system, were those of William Tubman (1944 – 1971) and William Tolbert (1971 – 1980). Tubman's administration took over the country when a fragile but unmistakable polity had been established. In his inaugural address as President; Tubman announced a two-tiered strategy comprising an economic scheme titled the *Open Door Policy* (ODP) and Unification scheme. While the ODP formed the economic pillar of Tubman's reforms, his Unification Programme was meant as a psychological boost and a cultural and political addendum. Its intentions were to reduce or eliminate the legal and other related differentiation between indigenous groups and settler descendants and had the aim of rectifying the gross social and economic disparities so conspicuous in the country. The

rationale behind the ODP was to encourage the investment of foreign capital in the development of the country, preferably on a partnership basis, and to accord to investors the necessary protection and treatment. However, there were disturbing aspects of these policies. For example, it increased the amount of revenue available to the government which in turn increased the scope of presidential patronage which enabled Tubman to transform the presidency into a personal domain. Secondly, because the policy was over-reliant on foreign investment, it increased the economic dependence of Liberia, failed to stimulate local entrepreneurship and stifled creativity. In the third place, the substantial economic growth in the 1950s and early 1960s did not produce commensurate broadly-shared economic, social and political development. Rather it strengthened the Americo-Liberian dominant over the indigenous people.

The UP officially aimed at bridging the gap between the Americo-and African-Liberians. It involved the extension of the suffrage for the first time to the indigenes, the formulation and implementation of schemes to obliterate the psychological impediments to integration and the restructuring of the subdivisions of the country to foster parity in representation. Tubman himself had emphasized that the UP was based on the belief that the nation should be composed of men (and women) who were equal under the law and had the same rights and privileges. The UP, no doubt, succeeded in reducing tension and attempted to break the long standing suspicion between settlers and indigenes. It also provided Tubman with a means of preventing the indigenous people from rising up against the settler elite at a time when liberation and self-determination was in vogue throughout Africa.

In response to these political openings, several socio-political movements were established to fight for a more just and equitable society.

### **Liberia: 1980-1996**

On April 12 1980 a major change erupted in Liberia's turbulent political scene when a group of 17 non-commissioned officers in the AFL overthrew the TWP and established a ruling body under the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council. This period saw the formation of different coalitions against the government taking shape. The end result of the continuation of Americo-Liberian policy of exploiting ethnic differences and Doe's new version resulted in the development in Liberia of a mind-

set in which ethnic animosities continued to be part and parcel of the collective memories of many groups. In such a situation, even though grievances could be overlaid by other components, the ethnic factor was never too far from the surface, and was always available for political manipulation. Irrespective of the character of the initial coalitions formed against Doe, for many of the major actors, their complaints against the Krahn dominated second republic degenerated into ethnic animosities, which were to emerge both as a major factor in the conflict and similarly fuelled the dynamics of escalation.

In December 1989, therefore, the first major coalition led by Charles Taylor under the designation of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) invaded Liberia. Backed by Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire with a sprinkling of other West African sympathisers, the NPFL had within five months managed to capture all the economically viable parts of Liberia. It was at this point that the coalition began to factionalise with the establishment of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia under the leadership of Prince Yormie Johnson, former chief of staff of the NPFL. Between 1990 and 1996 when the conflict was resolved almost seven major groups were formed along predominantly ethnic and religious lines and controlling specific territories.

With such an array of diverse coalitions against Doe, internal rebellion against the government and support for the rebel led to the collapse of central authority. Liberia's traditional political structures crumbled under the pressure of rebels and the institution of traditional chieftaincy was defaced and was replaced by the unquestioned authority of the rebel commanders who became the new authority figures. The country's political subdivisions, known as "Counties", became a reflection of their former self, administered by feared former rebel commanders with no roots in areas of their authority. Cultural institutions such as the Poro and the Sande were bastardized beyond recognition, robbed of their substance as once authority entities which brought cohesion and security for many peasants and rural dwellers. To ensure that these institutions fall within the President's psyche of lawlessness and disorder, Charles Taylor, on getting to power, ordered all cabinet ministers to join these societies even if the ministers harbour no beliefs in them. But as all ministers failing to attend a prayer service were dismissed and later rehired, anyone refusing to obey such orders not only loses his/her job, but also must flee the country to avoid other charges, as was the case with the leader of the Senate and

member of the president's party who escaped to the US following disagreements with President Taylor.

Nevertheless, this process of political decay did not just commence when Taylor became President. This avalanche of disintegration began with the war itself, and stories abound about how rural authority figures were beheded by rebel commanders, many of them misfits who roamed around, empowered by the rebel National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), United Liberation Movement for Democracy in Liberia (ULIMO), the Liberia Peace Council (LPC) and the multiplicity of armed factions that emerged in the brutal contest for loot and influence. In this orgy of tearing down state and social structures, no one was spared once suspected. For example, in the border town of Foya, a base of operations for Sierra Leone's ruthless Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a priest was said to have been executed, and his body dissected into several chunks. His ULIMO killers then packed the pieces in a wheelbarrow, according to eyewitnesses, forcing relatives and worshippers to buy the blood-dripping pieces of the priest's body.

In the Mandingo town of Bakedu in 1990, according to survivors, NPFL fighters ordered all the Imams, elders, women and children---the town's people--- to assemble in the town centre. Happily and innocently, the people assembled, for they had valid reasons to be happy over the presence of NPFL rebels in their town. Prior to the war, Mr. Samuel Doe's National Democratic Party of Liberia dumped the winner of a paramount chieftaincy election and installed the loser, a favorite but unpopular crony of Mr. Doe's party, Paramount Chief of the chiefdom. The town's people saw the NPFL as liberators. As far as they were concerned, they thought it was now the dawn of justice. To indicate their appreciation for this day of reckoning (as they imagined), they presented a couple of cows as presents for the "liberators".

In the ensuing escalation, the complex original coalition formations degenerated into purely ethnic and religious groupings, and subsequent struggles for control and domination led to some of these groupings to change the nature of the conflict into sub-state or quasi-states conflicts. Some sub-states even went to the extent of declaring real or imagined autonomy from Liberia. The most functional of these quasi-states or sub-states was Greater Liberia formed by Charles Taylor with his capital at Gbarnga. The Liberian government engaged other ethnic groups in the

country in a bitter warfare that lasted for seven years and this resulted into a mass population displacement.

However, the biography of the two prominent personalities in the history of internal displacement of the Liberian populations is herewith considered relevant.

### **President Samuel K. Doe (1980-1990)**

Samuel Kanyon Doe was born on May 6, probably in 1951. He was born in Tuzon, a small town in Grand Gedeh County, in the South-eastern part of Liberia. His parents were poor and uneducated, like most rural Liberians, and they belong to the Krahn tribe. Samuel Doe had only accomplished primary education when he became a career soldier, presumably because of lack of other job opportunities. In October 1979 he was promoted Master Sergeant in the Liberian Army. He was in his 4th high school grade and attending night school classes when he and a group of soldiers seized power, assassinated President William R. Tolbert, Jr., and established, for the first time in Liberia's history, military rule over the country. It was April 12, 1980. Since Samuel Doe was the highest ranking non-commissioned officer of the 18 plotters, all but him ordinary soldiers, he became Chairman of the People's Redemption Council (PRC) that was created.

The military coup is still surrounded by mysteries. Apparently, the preparations for it went unnoticed which is astonishing, given the fact that there was considerable political tension and also in light of the well-staffed U.S. Embassy in Morovia (over 500 people). Samuel Doe was not a publicly known figure in Liberia before April 12, 1980. That soon changed after that date. The military take-over was a bloody one, labeled 'a revolution' by the 18 enlisted men of the Armed Forces of Liberia who toppled the Government of William R. Tolbert. Private soldier Harrison Pennoh, who later proved mentally unstable, savagely murdered the 66-year old President. Before the end of the month the entire Cabinet had been put on trial and sentenced to death - with no right to be defended by a lawyer and no right to appeal against the verdict. In a horrific scene they were all but one publicly executed on a beach near Monrovia. The only cabinet member who escaped from being shot was the only minister of tribal origin, raised in an Americo-Liberian family that was part of the Tolbert-clan. Chairman – later Head of State - Samuel Doe at numerous occasions reiterated the army's pledge to return to the barracks. On April



12, 1981, on the first anniversary of the coup, he announced the creation of a 25-member Constitutional Commission under the leadership of a renowned Liberian, Dr Amos Sawyer. A new constitution 'should pave the road to a genuine democracy'.

However, within the four years that followed everything changed. Chairman Doe started to like the taste of power. He increasingly surrounded himself with members of the (small) Krahn-tribe, in number hardly exceeding the Americo-Liberians who now were excluded from power. The USA was greatly relieved when Doe maintained the country's pro-Western stance and Doe was even invited at the White House. It was here that President Ronald Reagan made his historic blunder when he cordially greeted 'Chairman Moe' when he warmly shook his hand. Nevertheless, Liberia received more political and military assistance from the USA in the decade of Doe's rule than it had ever received, despite an increasingly deteriorating political climate and human rights record.

When in July 1985 the ban on politics and political parties was lifted President Doe created his own party, the National Democratic Party of Liberia (NDPL). He was the NDPL's candidate for the presidential elections slated for October of the same year. The elections were neither free nor fair but Doe was declared winner with nearly 51 percent of the poll. There were numerous accusations of fraud and indications that the opposition Liberia Action Party (LAP), led by Jackson Doe (not related), was the real winner. The international community did not react, the US State Department 'was pleased'. Dr. Samuel K. Doe – he had received an Honorary Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Political Science from the University of Seoul during one of his numerous visits abroad – was sworn in as Liberia's 20th President, and First President of the Second Republic, on January 6, 1986. Related to the October 1985 presidential elections three incidents are worth mentioning. First, when Samuel Doe started to prepare for the race to the Executive Mansion, he consulted Dr Amos Sawyer, a highly popular politician, intellectual and academic. He wanted Amos Sawyer to become his Vice-President, but Sawyer declined. Subsequently, he fell into disgrace, was threatened, and his house burnt. His political party, the Liberia People's Party (LPP), was accused of endangering the democratic process and subsequently banned from the presidential elections.

Second, since one of the clauses of the new constitution stipulated that the new president of the country was to be at least 35 years of age, Samuel Doe had his year of birth changed. Whereas ever since the military coup it was mentioned that it had been led by a 28-year old master sergeant, from now on Samuel Doe's official date of birth was May 6, 1950. This has led to hilarious situations. In his book 'The road to democracy under the leadership of Samuel Kanyon Doe', Willie Givens writes in 'A brief biography of Dr Samuel K. Doe' that he was born on May 6, 1950. He also shows a picture taken May 6, 1981 with the sub-title 'the man who changed the course of Liberia's history three weeks before the age of 29, celebrates his 30th birthday' (Givens, 1986: 98).

The third incident perhaps is the most important and severe. One month after the elections, Doe's former right hand, Commanding General Thomas Quiwonkpa led an armed invasion from Nimba County, in the north of the country. Soon the rebels were in Monrovia where they attacked the Executive Mansion. Two years earlier, Quiwonkpa, who hailed from Nimba County, had been accused of an attempt to overthrow the Government but was granted clemency. This time, during the November 1985 revolt, he was killed, his mutilated body publicly displayed. The excessive and brutal reprisals of the Krahn-led Liberian Army against the Mano and Gio, in Nimba County, proved to become important stepping stones to the civil war that officially began in December 1989 – also starting in Nimba. On Christmas Eve 1989, an alliance composed of Americo-Liberians and Mano and Gio people, united in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPLF), invaded from Cote d'Ivoire. The NPLF was led by Charles Taylor, a corrupt former civil servant under Doe, who was born from an Americo-Liberian father and a Golah-mother. An internal rift between the Americo-Liberian and tribal fighters in the NPFL resulted in a split led by 'General' Prince Johnson, from Nimba County, who created the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia. The Liberian army was soon losing control over a large part of the territory and Doe asked Nigeria's president Babangida, with whom he presumably had common business interests, for support. In August 1990 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sent a 4,000-man peacekeeping force to Liberia, known as ECOMOG. On September 9, 1990 President Samuel Doe, on a visit to ECOMOG-headquarters in Monrovia, was captured by Prince Y.

Johnson. Doe was tortured, mutilated and finally brutally killed by Johnson and his men.

Ironically, Samuel Doe died in the hands of a mentally defective Liberian, like his predecessor who had also succumbed in the hands of a mentally unstable person. Doe's repressive military dictatorship and his transformation from a shy, thin, soft-spoken Master Sergeant into a corpulent, well-fed and well-clad Commander-In-Chief earned him a place next to other notorious heads of state like Idi Amin (Uganda), Jean-Bedel Bokassa (Central Africa), and 'Baby' Doc (Haiti). The greed for power, the corruption, nepotism and the abuse of human rights which Doe had reproached Tolbert had become a trademark of his regime.

### **Charles Taylor**

Taylor, one of seven children, was born on January 28, 1948 in Arthington, near Liberia's capital of Monrovia. His father, Nelson, worked as a teacher, sharecropper, lawyer, and judge and was an Americo-Liberian, a group of descendents from Liberia's original nineteenth-century settlers. His mother, Zoe, was a native Gola tribeswoman.

Taylor showed signs of his rebellious ways at an early age. As a teen, he was expelled from a private preparatory school outside Monrovia. As he grew older, he appeared drawn to the history of Liberia and its connections to the United States. By 1972, the 24-year-old Taylor arrived in Boston through a student visa to study.

"Taylor had long been captivated by the history of New England because many freed slaves had left on ships from New Bedford, Massachusetts to colonize Liberia," according to a biographical piece released by Gale Research in 1998. Taylor worked as a security guard, truck driver, and mechanic while attending Chamberlayne Junior College in Newton, Massachusetts. He later transferred to Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics in 1977.

During his undergraduate years at Bentley, Taylor joined the Union of Liberian Associations (ULA). He rose through the ranks of the organization to become its national chairman. It was while he chaired the ULA that Taylor emerged as a political force. In 1979, then-Liberian President William Tolbert visited the United States. Taylor led a

demonstration outside the Liberian mission in New York City to protest Tolbert's policies. Rather than ignore the rally leader, the Liberian leader asked Taylor to debate him. Taylor outshined the president during the debate and declared that he would take over the Liberian mission in New York. But he had overreached. He was arrested and jailed. Instead of pressing charges, however, Tolbert invited Taylor to return to Liberia. Taylor returned in the spring of 1980, on the eve of great changes that would change Liberia and his fortunes. Americo-Liberians had dominated the nation's political life from its founding in 1847 by freed American slaves. The economic and social disparity between the ancestors of the Americans and the native people created feelings of resentment amongst Liberians. It was this anger that helped spark a bloody coup that ultimately brought Taylor to power. On April 12, Tolbert, an Americo-Liberian, was murdered during a military coup led by army sergeant Samuel K. Doe. Through a personal declaration, Doe became the first indigenous president of Liberia. Months of bloody retribution by native Liberians against Americo-Liberians ensued.

Despite his connection to Tolbert, Taylor's political skill and economics background earned him a key position within the Doe government. As head of the General Services Agency, Taylor directed the purchasing of the Liberian government. He was later ousted from the post in May of 1983, accused of embezzling more than \$900,000 in government funds to a Citibank account. That October, Taylor fled to the United States. He was arrested in May of 1984, and a court in Boston determined that there were sufficient grounds to detain him while Liberia's request to send the fugitive back was considered. In September of 1985, while awaiting extradition, Taylor escaped from the Plymouth House of Corrections. Taylor's movements over the next four years were not certain. Liberian and American authorities placed him in Libya, where it was believed he received shelter and military training from Muammar Qaddafi.

What is certain is Taylor returned to Liberia on Christmas Eve in 1989, at the head of a guerilla force of 100 to 500 men called the National Patriotic Front of Liberia [NPFL]. The NPFL settled in Gbarnga, some 100 miles northeast of Monrovia. Taylor said he had returned to topple the government, reportedly declaring, "The best Doe is a dead Doe". During the next seven months, Taylor's forces gained ground and recruits, battling back an increasingly weakened government. NPFL forces entered Monrovia in July of 1990. During the battle for Monrovia, the NPFL split

into two factions, one led by Taylor, and the other by Prince Johnson. By September, both divisions of the NPFL declared victory over Doe's regime, but the Johnson-led group had secured and occupied the city of Monrovia. Doe was captured and executed by Johnson forces as he attempted to leave the country.

Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor was elected president of Liberia in July of 1997, garnering over 75 percent of the vote in an election that international observers considered. Taylor's ascent to power, and the election of fellow National Patriotic Party candidates to a majority of legislative seats in the National Assembly, marked what many hoped would be the end of seven years of civil strife.

### **Conclusion**

These two powerful individuals – Samuel K. Doe and Charles G. Taylor – though not the authors of the collapse of the Liberian state that had been in existence for more than one and a half centuries could be said to be the immediate super-actors to the complete collapse of the State of Liberia.

We believe this study is instructive in understanding the present dimensions of Liberian State.

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